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What about *Walden*?

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Ben Rabe

Sophomore

Literary Explorations 1

10 November 2011

What about *Walden*?

In the complete and utter blackness, I strained my eyes and ears in a constant struggle to remain aware of my surroundings, as it always seems that the inhabitants of the forest are most active when one isn't paying attention. Still in darkness, I found myself in a perpetual struggle against myself to retain my focus. Just as I began to succumb to the pressures of sleep, the first light appeared over the horizon. Within minutes, I was bathed in the gentle, forgiving sunlight that cleansed me of all desire for rest. I felt alert, connected to my surroundings and the subtle beauty of the rising sun. I could see beautiful rays of orange unparalleled by any synthetic means radiating through the atmosphere. I began to question the motives of all mankind in this earliest of my experiences with hunting; I couldn't understand the common desire for progress harbored by man, or why not every capable man or woman wasn't doing the exact same as me, taking in this profound beauty in nature. Similarly, Henry Thoreau's *Walden* provides people seeking more natural lives with a guide to simplifying their existences. More importantly, however, Thoreau does so in a fashion of awe-inspiring literary work.

In *Walden*, one of the most clear-cut of Thoreau's intentions is supplying the reader with a guide to simplifying his life and moving away from the materialism that was becoming increasingly evident at the time. Thoreau writes that:

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect

to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. (Thoreau 833)

Thoreau believes that the vast majority of wealth lies not in material or riches, but in inward knowledge, wisdom, and philosophy. He claims that only men who voluntarily place themselves in positions of poverty can survey the world and its inhabitants in an unbiased and whole fashion. Men who seek simplicity and wisdom must strip themselves of unnecessary belongings and uptake frugal and minimalist lifestyles. The rest of mankind, however, was traveling in the opposite direction. This is quite evident today in the extreme consumerism visible all over the United States. Thoreau goes on to say that “Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this” (842). Here, he is illustrating to the reader the futility of a costly residence. He goes on to indicate exactly how he went about creating his residence at Walden Pond. In total, the construction cost Thoreau \$28.12 ½ dollars. He also specifies that his furniture was of very little expense to him, as he made some of it himself. Finally, he indicates his displeasure with costly clothing by saying “No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch on his clothes” (838). In many chapters of *Walden*, Thoreau directs others seeking to simplify their lives.

The most important feature discussed regarding *Walden* is the exquisite writing style. There are many ingenious devices that Thoreau included in his work. For instance, one can clearly see the passing of time, as the entire book is set as one year progresses through the seasons. In the beginning of the book, he makes references to summer, such as “I did not read books during the first summer. I hoed beans” (882). Then, fall arrives, and Thoreau mentions “In the fall, the loon came, as usual, to moult and bathe in the pond, making the woods rings with his wild laughter before I had risen” (898). The season then drifts into winter, when he writes “The

opening of large tracts by the ice-cutters commonly causes a pond to break up earlier; for the water, agitated by the wind, even in cold weather, wears away the surrounding ice” (899).

Finally, in the last chapters of the book, spring arrives. Thoreau excitedly exclaims “The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with a younger hope than ever!” (906). The entire piece gradually moves in emotion and literal time from productive summer, to slightly fall, to frigid winter, then finally to joyous spring. In addition to the passing of time, *Walden* holds many passages that are filled with beautiful, elegant language that flows remarkably well and interweaves flawlessly to form paragraphs, pages, and chapters. A fine example of this moving language can be seen in the following passage:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (877)

As we see from this passage, Thoreau’s writing carries an abundance of literary devices that clarify and help the reader envision exactly what Thoreau wills him to. Also a prime example of Thoreau’s smooth writing style, this passage exemplifies the ease with which his sentences and ideas fit together to reveal the entire picture. This work embodies a wide berth of well-used literary techniques to both educate and entertain the reader.

As I sat in the woods that day, watching the sun slowly climb above the horizon, I began to wonder why so many people concern themselves only with that which brings wealth, and not

so much with the sacred beauty that surrounds them at all times. In *Walden*, Thoreau ponders a similar question. He wonders why his contemporaries are so concerned with money, industry, and technological advancement, but pay no heed to the vast grace of the world around them. He tries to provide those seeking a more natural life with a do-it-yourself guide of sorts. Most importantly, Thoreau does so in a powerful, flowing literary work that not only enlightens readers, but entertains as well.

Works Cited

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. *Concise Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. George McMichael et al. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001. 827-919. Print.